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ABSTRACT

When she began teaching, one instructor thought everything had to come from her. It took a couple of years before she understood that what students themselves bring to the experience is instrumental--even vital--in helping them connect with what happens in the classroom. In their freshman composition journals, students produced writing based on modes such as narration, description, comparison/contrast, persuasion, process, and the like. They struggled to make what they wanted to say fit the modes, and the instructor watched them subvert their ideas in deference to the form. Students obviously had stories to tell, their own stories, so the instructor put her blinders on, went with story, and tried a course called "The Story of My Life." The course was based on the reading and writing of autobiography--a way to validate the variety of personal stories in journals and essays. And the modes? Allow the students to stick to the ideas. Now the personal, family, and life knowledge flows from the students connecting to the classroom and the reading and writing of the course. The goal is for them to learn that their own stories are important, that identifying themselves and their experiences with the literature will make it theirs. (CR)

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If You Listen Hard Enough: The Art of Connecting

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The verse from *The King and I* song, "Getting to Know You," is instructive: "If you become a teacher from your students you will learn." Nonetheless, when I began teaching I thought everything had to come from me. A one-way street. Students would leave everything else behind and leap excitedly into knowledge and even scholarship. A case of the empty box I would fill. It took a couple of years before I understood that what students themselves bring to the experience is instrumental — even vital—in helping them connect with what happens in the classroom. Their ideas have proved to be more valuable than I imagined or the song suggested.

The first hint that I was off the mark came from Freshman Composition journals. Based on the modes, students produced writing in narration, description, comparison/ contrast, persuasion, process, and the like. Who was I to question textbooks and that time-tested method? But there was a problem, I found. Student writers struggled to make what they wanted to say fit the modes, and I watched them subvert their ideas in deference to the form. For example, when a description of the beauties of a mountain stream turned away from description and became an argument calling for environmental controls to maintain the area for plants and animals, I found the student crossing out the heart of the writing, the argument, to stay in the descriptive mode as the assignment decreed. Another student wrote a

comparison of horses on the family ranch—saddle broken vs free roaming. He got caught up in the story of a ranch hand, a worker who insisted on proving his manhood by taming a wild horse even though he lacked the experience himself and refused to listen to those who would deter him. The writer had set up a clear exemplum on the danger of pride, but the best part was scratched out because it was not comparison/contrast and did not fit the assignment. Oops, I said again. Something is not right here and needs to be fixed.

Students obviously had stories to tell, their own stories, so I put my blinders on, went with story, and tried a Freshman Composition course based on the reading and writing of autobiography since so much excellent reading had recently been published. We read Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, Eudora Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings*, and Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*. We also read excerpts from Russell Baker's *Growing Up*, Victor Villaseñor's *Rain of Gold*, Gordon Parks's *Voices in the Mirror*, Christy Brown's *My Left Foot*. In addition I put a collection of memoir and autobiography on library reserve for an investigation of the variety of organizational modes and storytelling designs. Russell Baker talks about the importance of such decisions in his essay titled "Life with Mother" included in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. The course title, "The Story of My Life," announced what we were doing, a way to validate the variety of personal stories in journals and essays.

And the modes? At first I felt guilty, so we spent a day near the end of the

semester identifying where students had employed various modes. Then I realized how ridiculous that was. What writer consciously accommodates modes? Allow the students to stick to the ideas, I told myself. Now the personal, family, and life knowledge flows from the students connecting to the classroom and the reading and writing of the course.

Pearlie Sheffield wrote of her early years in Arcola, Mississippi, a life similar to Maya Angelou's in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, but I was surprised she had not read Angelou. Sheffield speaks of the vegetable garden the entire family tended and her mentor, Mrs. Rosie Brown, who taught her sewing and gave her "that delicate touch" so that, as Sheffield says, "between the advice she gave to be a lady and the backbone my mom gave me, I came out ahead." The highlight of her memoir, "The Blue Dress," is the story of the seventh grade banquet, an occasion looked forward to by all the children but Sheffield who "carried a sad load around for days because growing up in a house with eleven children and being sharecroppers, I knew there was no money for a dress or shoes at that time of year." Miraculously, her mother manages an entire outfit for this most important event, and she can scarcely believe that such a miracle has happened for her.

When I discovered this wonderful writer had not read Maya Angelou, I gave her a copy of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The next time I saw Pearlie, she pulled me aside and with tears in her eyes told me quietly and intensely, "I read it all. I couldn't put it down. That's my story too." And—to think—I might have buried her stories in

other, less important but possibly more academic endeavors.

A Young Wayfarer's Atlas is Nancy Fong's memoir, her effort to discover what it means to grow up Chinese American and the youngest child in an Oklahoma City family of five children. She tells about a mother who loved bright lipstick and platform clogs. She describes a father who runs a restaurant in the "night life of reds, blacks, broken fortunes, and silver tin dishes," a father who teaches her "the hand which ultimately feeds me is my own hand." She loses both parents as a girl and must live with her old grandmother who speaks only Chinese, a language not familiar to the American child of Chinese heritage. But Fong is a survivor. She bows three times to her good luck cricket and her ancestors and goes forward to discover her way in the world. She leaves her readers a fascinating memoir. [Both Sheffield and Fong were subsequently published by *Palo Alto Review*.]

Freshman Composition, therefore, can allow students to write about their lives and bring their experiences into the classroom if they and the instructor are so inclined. But surely personal involvement, especially as personal writing, must be limited to this beginning course and not brought to the rest of the curriculum in English, especially literature. As the queen of English studies, literature commands us to fashion ourselves for her, not the other way around. We must attend to the literature itself and not get entangled in matters dealing with the *hoi polloi*. At least I thought that was the case, but here again I had much to learn.

Initially, journals in my literature courses were the repositories for questions

posed to students, questions that I hoped would move them from what happened in the story, essay, or poem into why and how it happened. Even here, I began to notice certain students sliding over into a personal response. Mostly, I allowed such asides because they seemed harmless things though certainly not literary. Then I began to question students about their preferences among the selections I made for the curriculum. Soon I added the personal reaction questions such as, "What did you like best about this? How did it make you feel? Could you find any connections with your own life?" Still, I was not willing to acknowledge that I was meddling in the sophisticated realm of Great Literature, so I didn't look it straight in the eye at first. I didn't have the nerve to meddle in such things. Normally hesitant and reticent students began to respond, however, so I kept on. Quietly.

As the reading journals have evolved over the years, readers may summarize briefly but thereafter are instructed to begin investigating the interrelationship of the parts and how connections can be made within the work itself, with other works outside, and even with their own lives. Students have told me over the years that sometimes it is difficult to find an element they can identify with because they feel isolated between what they know and that "other," the strangeness on the page. Some still suffer to a degree from the notion that the teacher ultimately will reveal the correct answers in class discussion, usually after a student has given a wrong answer. They question the validity of trying to figure out what a poem or story means when they know that only teachers know the right answers.

Ultimately however, memories are triggered by what we read and will come forward to help us see both the experience and the text more clearly. I think I will always remember most vividly a journal entry from a student who connected to *Anpao*, the story Jamake Highwater put together from a collection of native American creation myths from various tribes. Jason Phillip's journal included this response:

Jamake Highwater's *Anpao* is a book composed of different stories from different American Indian tribes, but it is shown with one main character, Anpao. The stories are narrated by a "human being" in the form of an owl named Wasicong. According to Indian beliefs, the owl is wisdom and for the ability to see, therefore, the owl is the perfect narrator.

For the rest of this response I am going to tell of an incident that occurred with myself and an owl—maybe off the subject of the book. Okay? [This is obviously what he really wants to talk about.] I have never known the majority of my family, therefore I am uncertain of my ancestry, but according to my father I have a great deal of Indian blood and Indian ancestry. I assume that is where I get my large nose and high cheek bones. Anyway, my father is a true believer in spirits and other Indian beliefs, but I find it extremely difficult to believe in things unless I have hard facts. I am also very hard headed. But a little over a year ago, I was at work one day out in the middle of nowhere by myself,

planting oats in a large field, when I spotted an owl flopping around on the ground. Thinking the owl was hurt, I went over to it figuring I would pick it up and take it to the vet at the end of the day. When I got up to the owl it lay on its back with its wings spread out and talons flared at me. But it allowed me to pick it up. I couldn't see anything wrong with it, but I kept it anyway. The rest of the day—2 or 3 hours—it lay behind the seat of the tractor, never giving any trouble. On the way home it lay on the seat of the truck, still never giving any trouble. The next day I took the magnificent creature to the vet, a friend of the family, and he and I began to examine it. And still the owl was as calm as could be. The vet couldn't find a thing wrong with the owl so he said he was going to keep it overnight and watch it.

The next day the vet called me at home and told me that he had been studying the Native Americans or American Indians a great deal, and then he asked me if I had any ancestry. The reason he asked was as soon as I left the day before, the owl went crazy, so crazy that neither he nor any of his assistants could catch it. So they opened all the doors to the outside and the owl flew away. I was amazed and now I somewhat believe in what the Indians believe.

And, yes, the owl found me. He lives in a tree out back and in the barn when the weather is bad. [Attached to the journal entry was a

snapshot of the owl perched in the bathroom of Jason's home.]

This journal writing helped everyone see how the spiritual or mythic does not reside apart but is within everyday life, much as Paula Gunn Allen explains in *The Sacred Hoop*.

The story has a postscript too. When I telephoned Jason for permission to use his journal entry he was not at home so I spoke with his father. "Oh, yes," said the father, "my mother was a full flooded Cherokee. I am called Little Owl. My spirit guide is the owl. "

Why was I not surprised?

In other instances, cultures which appear to diverge radically from each other sometimes are only next door, but if we help students read closely they may come to a deeper sense — particularly if they find some element in their own lives for connecting. Necessarily, the study of African American Literature must include the reading of slave narratives. Two students, both coming from Mexican American backgrounds and far removed from slavery in early America, nonetheless made connections with the slave narratives of Olaudah Equiano (*The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*) and Harriet Jacobs (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*). As Equiano in the opening chapter of his narrative goes back in memory and tells about his village before he was kidnapped, Bertha Puente was carried back to her childhood in Mexico and the customs of the old country. She wrote as follows:

Olaudah Equiano's beginnings show a young child of high intelligence and

of wonderful curiosity. His perceptions about his village are presented in vivid detail so that we can visualize ourselves in his tribe.

This brings to me my own native country which I left at the age of nine. I can still see my hometown and still remember its streets. The Sunday routines of church, going to the town market to buy little trinkets with the money saved during the week, the matinee to see the latest Tarzan movie, the family Sunday lunch, and the evening stroll around the town plaza. The weekly routine to school in the morning, two hours for lunch, at home, then returning for school from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.

In a small town, everyone knows each other, and what initiated the cotton picking season was the arrival of the migrant workers. When these strangers were in town my mother and other members of my family would always take us everywhere because they were afraid of the many kidnappers that were so prevalent during my younger years.

Living in a small community the sense of freedom is wonderful, we could go and come pretty much anywhere. My young friends and I had wonderful times together. We could go to the small river that was close to where we lived, and spend hours swimming, and cooling off during the hot days. We could explore some natural caves that were nearby. . . . The years that I lived in my country were wonderful.

Yes, I can sure feel Equiano's description of his town or tribe. The

sense of loss in his words is the same sense of loss in mine.

By writing an almost parallel narrative this student not only understood but entered into the great heartache for loss of homeland. A superb reading.

Ruby Lopez, on the other hand, was so moved by the plight of female slaves when they reached puberty and described in Harriet Jacobs's narrative, that only a poem could suitably respond. The poem, "Is That You, Mama?" is excerpted as follows:

He stands before my mama—

He stands before me—

Looking down on us with his mighty eyes.

And reaches to pick me up

I hear a muffled shriek

She does not move

Just grasps the bedspread

Looking as though she is bound to the bed we lie on

By ghostly ropes.

But her eyes—

"Mama, why do you look so torn?

Tell me, Mama!"

[The end of the poem finds the girl on a concrete floor, weak and at death's door, her last words the refrain, "Mama, is that you?"]

To identify so thoroughly is to know the literature.

Another way to entice students to connections is with their feet. Each semester I require attendance at one community cultural event — play, reading, lecture, or exhibit. As an extension to her study of Mexican American Literature, Delia Jalomo went to an art exhibit, a one-man show of paintings by San Antonio artist Jesse Treviño who paints life on the West Side of San Antonio where he grew up. This piece from her journal ended up in a letter sent to the artist:

I went Sunday to the San Antonio Museum of Art to see Jesse Treviño's paintings, your art. There hanging on the walls were colorful, vibrant pictures of my west side—the barrio. Who would have thought my little world important enough to paint.

Memories flooded into my mind of a childhood long forgotten. The store where my dad would pump gas and buy us sodas. Real bottled soda water and Spanish peanuts, salted, to put into our bottles. What a treat!

Or the bakery on Kentucky and Zarzamora in front of Little Flower Church. It's still there. And remembering the lady that lived next door, Senorita Theresita Cardenas, who Mom would call on every week. Her house full of antiques.

The other [painting] was the drugstore with the friends all lined up in front of the car. That was the classic picture of Mexicans posing. The

portrait of his mom. My world—yes—someone else thought it important to preserve. Yes, Jesse, I do remember. Good thoughts rush back. Thank you.

Sometimes I am hard pressed to explain this interconnectedness to students who insist they are living ordinary and uneventful lives, students who maintain they cannot relate to literature because it is difficult to understand and seems so distant. To those who do not yet see literature as the story of human beings just like themselves trying to figure out what they are supposed to do in this life. But I do have a clue. If those who have been outsiders can be helped to listen closely and carefully, they will eventually hear some—even if only *one*—thing that speaks to them. Then the idea of connections becomes a possibility — connecting to the voice coming from the page, connecting to the voices around the classroom, and connecting to the voices throughout their lives. Becoming part of the story themselves.

My hope and plan is that students will find something in my classes that means something and that they can carry away with them. I want them to learn their own story is important, that identifying themselves and their experiences with the literature will make it theirs—even if it is from some place they have never heard of or about people they had no idea existed. And finally I want them to believe that their place is not outside but *with* the literary and cultural events in the community. Then my efforts are rewarded.